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That Soviet Base in Cuba

WHEN MEMBERS of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee were briefed on the new Soviet submarine base now being built in Cuba, Senator Frank Church of Idaho produced a splendid example of his amiable idiocy about such matters. How could we be sure, he asked, that this was really going to be a Soviet base?

Well, there is a simple answer that even Senator Church may perhaps comprehend. Because of the past influence of the horrible American imperialists, Cubans to this day are mainly baseball players, whereas Russians are passionate soccer players. And the sports facilities with which the new base at Cienfuegos is being provided, very conspicuously center on a fine soccer field.

There are, of course, other, less simplistic reasons why the U.S. government is quite certain that the new submarine base is intended exclusively for Soviet use. Above all, it is being built to handle the largest and most advanced Soviet nuclear submarines, of the "Yankee" class, carrying 16 nuclear missiles apiece.

The real question, in fact, is not whether the base is strictly for Soviet use. The real question is why the Soviet war planners want such a base, when they have always before handled their distant submarines as we do, by ships specially built as submarine-tenders.

THE ONLY POSSIBLE answer is extremely disagreeable. In brief, there are certain kinds of repair and maintenance — particularly on the submarines' vital nuclear missiles — that are extremely difficult to carry out at sea, at least in large volume and continuously.

Hence a base like Cienfuegos is needed, when really large numbers of nuclear submarines are to be continuously at sea and far from home. That is the true explanation of the base. And the explanation means, in turn, that the Soviets are now planning continuous de-

ployment of very large numbers of "Yankee" class and other nuclear submarines in the Caribbean and along the American coast.

They will have plenty of them to deploy, God knows! Norman Polmar, one of the authoritative editors of "Jane's Fighting Ships," forecasts that the Soviet nuclear submarine fleet will be as large as our own by the end of this year. He further forecasts that the Soviets will have 50 more nuclear submarines than we do by the year 1974.

In the circumstances, the construction of the Cienfuegos base is an even more ominous development than the attempted deployment of Soviet nuclear missiles on Cuban bases in 1962. It reveals an undoubted Soviet intention to gain a solid capability to knock out the entire land-based bomber component of the U.S. deterrent, plus the controls of the

"Safeguard" ABM system.

The most horrifying single aspect of the story of the Cienfuegos base is the response the bad news has met with in this country. Consider a simple comparison.

IN 1962, the U.S. Senate was in flames over mere rumors of Soviet missiles in Cuba, long before the presence of those missiles was confirmed by U-2 reconnaissance photographs. Contrast this with Senator Church's amiable idiocy, and the senatorial silence that has engulfed the news from Cienfuegos ever since!

Or think of the Kennedy administration's memorable reaction to the undesired and, indeed, the quite unexpected bad news in 1962. And then think of the Nixon administration's response to this news that is even worse!

It is being said, of course, that the administration let the Soviets know we knew about their intended submarine base, "as a signal." The signal, it is claimed, will stop the further construction of the base, with no more fuss. If you can believe that, however, you

can believe anything at all, including the theories of world politics held by men like Senator Church and Sen. J. William Fulbright.

Meanwhile, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird has now clamped down an iron lid on any further Defense Department discussion of the Cienfuegos base and its ominous meaning. The obvious intent was, and is, to prevent the public from growing alarmed, when we should be deeply alarmed. And this intent is natural, in view of the progressive American disarmament being shockingly carried on in the face of growing danger!

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